

RONALD  REAGAN
INSTITUTE

THE PRESIDENT WHO TORE DOWN THAT WALL

By William Inboden

I.

The most famous four words of the Cold War almost went unsaid.

When President Ronald Reagan stood at the Brandenburg Gate and demanded “Mr. Gorbachev, Tear down this Wall!” he did so over the fierce resistance of his own Chief of Staff, the State Department, and National Security Council staff. For weeks leading up to the speech, Secretary of State George Shultz, Deputy National Security Advisor Colin Powell, and their respective staffs had expunged the offending words from multiple versions of the speech. Only to have Reagan himself, with the support of his speechwriters Tony Dolan and Peter Robinson, reinsert it each time.

The comments from State Department and NSC staff on early speech drafts give a flavor of the criticism of the imprecation against the Wall—and of other strong words Reagan planned to say. This “won’t fly with Germ[ans]. Not sentimental people.” “Seems silly as edited.” “This *must* come out. West Germans do *not* want to see East Germans insulted.” “Weak.” Needs “concrete ideas to sentimental fluff.” Too much “emphasis on good guys/bad guys.”¹

These objections were more than aesthetic. Behind them lay the substantive concerns of many foreign policy experts, not entirely without warrant, that Reagan should not challenge Gorbachev too directly and thus risk alienating or weakening the Soviet leader. And that the speech could damage relations with allies, especially West Germany; that it could raise false hopes and thus hurt America’s credibility; even that it could destabilize the delicate new reform equilibrium emerging in the Cold War.

Robinson originally penned the “tear down this wall” phrase. Several weeks before Reagan’s visit, the speechwriter had taken an advance trip to Berlin. Local friends hosted a dinner party for him with a cross-section of citizens of Berlin. All spoke with passion about their loathing of the Wall. One man described how his walk to work took him each morning past a guard tower at the Wall, where an East German sentry looked down at him through binoculars. “That solder and I speak the same language. We share the same history. But one of us is a zookeeper and the other is an animal, and I am never certain which is which.” Another woman grew impassioned and declared “If this man Gorbachev is serious with his talk of glasnost and perestroika, he can prove it. He can get rid of this wall.”²

¹ Robert Rowland and John M. Jones, “Reagan at the Brandenburg Gate: Moral Clarity Tempered by Pragmatism,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*. Spring 2006, Volume 9, No. 1, 21-50.

² Peter Robinson, *How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life* (New York: Harper 2003), 97-98.

That moment inspired Robinson; the words soon followed. Reagan would take the private wish of a West German woman and turn it into a public demand, uttered by one of the world's two most powerful men to the other, and heard by hundreds of millions of people across the globe. Such was Reagan's moral leadership in the Cold War. Many who suffered from communism's depredations, whether Berliners living in a sundered city, or Soviet dissidents imprisoned in the Gulag, or Polish priests laboring faithfully in the spiritual underground, found in Reagan one who would give voice to thoughts they could only say or think in private, if at all.

Robinson, whose gentle and self-effacing manner masked a sharp pen and intense resolve, often pointed out that he penned the phrase not as a new idea but to express Reagan's own long-held conviction. For this trip would be Reagan's third visit to the Berlin Wall. Each time his contempt for it grew. He first beheld it in 1978, when as an aspiring presidential candidate he took a tour of allied nations. In Berlin he saw sections of the Wall where East German citizens had been shot dead while trying to escape, and from the top of a West Berlin office building adjacent to the Wall he had watched below as East German police detained and interrogated a young man. For East Germans such episodes were a dreary daily occurrence. For Reagan it was an image that seared his conscience. He reported on his visit in his weekly newspaper column: "the bottom line is still human freedom. At one section of the Berlin Wall...there is one huge spray-painted graffito that reads: 'Those beyond this wall live in a concentration camp'."³

His next visit came in 1982. In London he delivered his Westminster address, heralding "the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history." He then traveled to West Germany. In Bonn 300,000 West German protestors, stirred in part by a surreptitious KGB campaign, protested his arms build-up and anticommunist policies. The protests served as a reminder that the Cold War's contest of ideas took place not just between the nations of the free world and the Soviet bloc, but within them.

From Bonn onward to West Berlin, where he returned to the Wall. At Tempelhof Airport he spoke to a garrison of American soldiers. "If I had a chance, I'd like to ask the Soviet leaders one question, 'Why is that wall there? Why are they so afraid of freedom on this side of the wall?' The truth is they're scared to death of it because they know that freedom is catching, and they don't dare let their people have a taste of it."

To a reporter's query as to his opinion of the Wall, Reagan responded "It's as ugly as the idea behind it." Came the follow-up question: Did he think that Berlin would ever be reunified? The president gave an unequivocal answer: "Yes."⁴ Five years and a day later, he would return to Berlin and call for just that.

Reagan's visits to the Wall over the decade followed a sequence. On the first trip he abhorred it. On the second trip he denounced it. On the third, he would demand its destruction.

Not without a final spate of protests from the State Department and NSC staff. In June, both onboard Air Force One and again after Reagan had landed in Europe, the State Department sent yet further entreaties that the phrase be scrapped.

³ Quoted in Peter Hannaford, *The Reagans: A Political Portrait* (New York: Coward-McCann 1983), 191-192.

⁴ "Reagan, in Berlin, Bids Soviet work for a Safe Europe," *New York Times*, June 12 1982. Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1991), 471-472.

Reagan disregarded these objections. Though this most paradoxical of presidents did not like personal confrontation and paid little heed to staff management, the affable Reagan could be fierce and firm when challenged. It was his speech; it was his presidency; it was his Cold War strategy. He would say what he wanted to say. As he asked rhetorically of Deputy Chief of Staff Ken Duberstein after one final desperate gambit from State and the NSC to tear out the “Tear Down” line: “I’m the president, right?... So I get to decide whether that line about tearing down the wall stays in?”

He was. It did.

II.

Reagan arrived in West Berlin at a peculiar moment in his presidency. The past six months had been a trial. The Iran-Contra scandal and subsequent investigations had caused turmoil within his team, damaged his political standing, hurt his credibility, and sapped his morale. His approval ratings had plummeted almost 20 points, falling under 50% for the first time in four years. He was now on his fifth National Security Advisor and third chief of staff. His party had lost its Senate majority, leaving Capitol Hill unified under Democratic control and in opposition to much of his agenda. He had only 18 months left in office, as his would-be successors had already started political maneuvering for the next year’s election, and his impending lame-duckhood loomed with each passing day. Age and the cumulative fatigue of the world’s hardest job further enervated his vigor.

Yet considered across the span of the past six years rather than just six months, the view improved. Reagan’s Cold War strategy combining pressure and negotiations towards the Soviets seemed to be bearing fruit. He had led America’s economic recovery and military expansion, both of which strengthened his hand with Moscow. He had renewed America’s alliances, which he viewed as a unique source of American power. Among those with whom he had forged close friendships – rare among heads of government – were four center-right leaders who shared his anticommunist and free market convictions: Yasuhiro Nakasone of Japan, Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain, Brian Mulroney of Canada, and his host for the Berlin visit, Helmut Kohl of West Germany.

The Reagan Doctrine of support for anticommunist fighters had bolstered insurgent forces in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Angola, and Nicaragua, imposing painful costs on the Kremlin in the pocketbook and on the battlefield. Reagan’s economic warfare against the Soviet Union -- including tightened technology export controls, the defense build-up, and coordinated action with Saudi Arabia to increase oil production and drive down hard currency earnings for Soviet oil exports – had put Moscow’s coffers under unsustainable strain. His unrelenting advocacy for human rights, especially for Soviet religious and political activists, had contributed to more freedom of religion and speech behind the Iron Curtain, and numerous prisoners released, such as the famed dissident Anatoly Scharansky. His commitment to the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) had withstood fierce opposition from the Soviets and much caviling from his allies. SDI embodied his plan to neutralize the Kremlin’s edge in ICBMs, and his dream to escape the strategic insanity of mutual assured destruction and eventually to abolish all nuclear weapons.

Twice had Reagan met with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, in Geneva in 1985 and Reykjavik in 1986. The two leaders forged a unique rapport that blended wariness, rivalry, respect, and affection. The Cold War standoff pervaded their relationship. Both sought to reduce the risk of nuclear war by reducing their respective arsenals. Six months hence they would sign the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty -- unprecedented in the annals of warfare -- eliminating an entire class of nuclear weapons.

Neither leader, however, had deviated from his ultimate goal. For Gorbachev, this was reforming and preserving the Soviet system, including its Warsaw Pact satellites, so that communism could endure in perpetuity. For Reagan, it was defeating the Soviet empire and ending the Cold War. Their respective goals were, at their core, incommensurate. Despite their growing cooperation, the two diplomatic partners both knew that at some point their paths may have to diverge.

III.

Berlin might be that junction. Though the Cold War played out on every continent, Europe sat at its geographic epicenter, and Berlin sat at the epicenter of Europe. Here, at Ground Zero of the Cold War, Reagan would draw together all of the strands of his strategy and throw down the gauntlet for Gorbachev. Doing so entailed weakening and marginalizing the Kremlin, so that Gorbachev would have to negotiate from weakness. Reagan's ultimate goal was to bring the Soviet Union to a negotiated surrender.

Good presidents manage the challenges they face. Great presidents imagine a better world - and then work to bring it about. Reagan was the first and only president to imagine a Berlin without the Wall, a Europe without the Soviet empire, and a new world beyond the Cold War.

But how to get there? He knew that the Soviet Union's viability depended on, among other factors, a docile populace, subservient vassal states, and acceptance by the rest of the world. So Reagan built a strategy predicated on separating the Kremlin from its sources of strength and legitimacy.

He did so with three wedges. First, he drove a wedge between the Kremlin and its own people, through advocacy for their human rights, through broadcasting to them the ideas of a free society, through speaking the truth about the evil of the Marxist gangsters who ruled them. Second, he drove a wedge between Kremlin and its Warsaw Pact satellites, those nations of Eastern Europe subjugated by Soviet imperialism since the end of World War II. Third, he drove a wedge between the Kremlin and the community of nations, depriving the Soviet rulers of the legitimacy and international respect they so craved.

On June 12, 1987, he stood at the Brandenburg Gate and wielded all three wedges together.

Reagan also knew that his speech had multiple audiences: The American people and Congressional leaders back home, wondering if their president could recover his strength and vision. The allies in Asia and especially Europe, wondering whether Reagan's emerging partnership with Gorbachev would align with or against their interests, and whether the United States would back up its diplomatic outreach with firmness. The people living behind the Iron Curtain, wondering if their bondage might ever end. The governments of the Warsaw Pact, alternately servile and resistant to Moscow's suffocating control, wondering how much the United States would continue to challenge the Kremlin. And among these audiences of hundreds of millions, he spoke to one man above all others: Gorbachev himself.

Reagan saw the wall not just as a monstrosity lacerating Berlin; it also stood as a metaphor for the Iron Curtain that rent Europe asunder, and even for communist tyranny worldwide. Only Marxist dictatorships felt the need to imprison their own citizens behind their own borders. Reagan pointed this out often, most eloquently in his Westminster address: "Of all the millions of refugees we've seen in the modern world, their flight is always away from, not toward the Communist world. Today on the NATO line, our military forces face east to prevent a possible invasion. On the other side of the line, the Soviet forces also face east to prevent their people from leaving."

From the Brandenburg Gate, Reagan ranged wide, across time, and across the globe. Possessed of a deep historical sensibility, the president saw his nation and his role in the stream of the history, as it flowed from the past into the present and onward. He believed that history favored liberty over tyranny, that America inherited the burden (and privilege) of international leadership from its forebears, and he bore the mantle of the presidency as an institution to be preserved, strengthened, and passed on to his successors.

History pervaded his speech. The 750th anniversary of Berlin's founding occasioned his visit, so Reagan paid tribute to the resilience of a city "more than 500 years older than our own nation." John F. Kennedy had spoken at this same spot a quarter century earlier, so he honored Kennedy's words even as he sought to fulfill Kennedy's unfinished hopes.

Reagan heralded the Marshall Plan, announced 40 years earlier that same month. He spoke of the sign preserved as an artifact in the Reichstag: "The Marshall plan is helping here to strengthen the free world." As it had done. He recalled what had since transpired: "A strong, free world in the West, that dream became real. Japan rose from ruin to become an economic giant. Italy, France, Belgium – virtually every nation in Western Europe saw political and economic rebirth."

Turning to the present, he connected the concrete and barbed wire edifice encircling Berlin to the global contest for liberty. "As long as this gate is closed, as long as this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not the German question alone that remains open, but the question of freedom for all mankind."

Reagan recalled that the Soviet dictator who built the Wall, Nikita Khrushchev, three decades earlier had pronounced his own four words: "we will bury you." That phrase – at once a threat, a promise, and a prophecy – embodied the Kremlin's worldview toward the West. Soviet communism combined Marxism's historical dialectic and belief in the inevitable triumph of proletarian revolution and classless utopia, with Leninism's tyranny, militance, and support for communism's global spread. It was an article of Soviet faith that democratic capitalism would succumb inevitably to communism. Not content to wait, Moscow used its power to accelerate this fate.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Kremlin had done just so, installing communist dictatorships and creating vassal states in Central and Eastern Europe and North Korea, and trying to do so further in places such as Turkey, Greece, Iran, and Italy. In the decades hence, the Soviets fueled communism's growth – through revolution, insurgencies, or outright invasion – on every continent, including such countries as Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Cuba, Angola, Ethiopia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Where subject peoples revolted, such as in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, Red Army tanks rolled in to crush the rebellions, a gruesome practice that became codified as the Brezhnev Doctrine.

Reagan had long rejected communism's expansion as neither historically inevitable nor popularly desired. At Notre Dame in 1981 he had promised that "the West won't contain communism, it will transcend communism...it will dismiss it as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written." The next year at Westminster he observed, in a self-conscious echo of Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech, that "From Stettin on the Baltic to Varna on the Black Sea, the regimes planted by totalitarianism have had more than 30 years to establish their legitimacy. But none -- not one regime -- has yet been able to risk free elections. Regimes planted by bayonets do not take root."

Now across the years, standing at the Brandenburg gate in the dark shadow of the Wall, Reagan responded to Khrushchev's proclamation that communism would bury the free world. Reagan also used only four words: "tear down this wall!"

His was not a generic imprecation against the Wall, or a plaintive plea that somehow it be conjured away. For Reagan did not issue his demand aimlessly into the summer air. He directed it to the one person who could fulfill it.

“General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

IV.

Though Reagan liked Gorbachev, he did not yet trust him (or as he often said to the Soviet leader, “trust but verify”). Reagan made this demand to test the Soviet premier’s sincerity and credibility. Did Gorbachev really mean to pursue reform, openness, and peace, as he claimed in their private meetings? Then let him prove it by dismantling this abomination that divided Berlin and pierced the heart of Europe. The scholar Jim Mann observes that addressing the appeal to Gorbachev “turned the wall into the litmus test for whether the Soviet Union was really changing or not.”⁵

Reagan’s words formed part of his arsenal of coercive diplomacy. Military and economic power gave teeth to diplomacy, of course, but Reagan could turn words into rhetorical coercion. He put Gorbachev on the defensive and reminded the world that the Soviets had built the Wall, the Soviets maintained the Wall, and the Soviets could dismantle the Wall.

Yet he held fast to diplomacy as well. Reagan invited Gorbachev “to cooperate...to promote true openness, to break down barriers that separate people, to create a safer, freer world.” He described several specific ways that he and Gorbachev could partner to bring Berlin together, and to reduce the nuclear threat.

Reagan then turned from the Wall to the broader conflict it represented. “East and West do not mistrust each other because we are armed; we are armed because we mistrust each other. And our differences are not about weapons but about liberty.”

Embedded in this statement was one of Reagan’s greatest strategic innovations, his theory about the nature of the Cold War. Every previous American president had seen the Cold War as primarily a great power conflict between the United States and Soviet Union, undergirded by a contest of ideas. Reagan reversed this. He saw the Cold War as primarily a battle of ideas, overlaid with a great power competition. As former Reagan NSC staff member and scholar Henry Nau describes, “For Reagan, the bedrock force in international affairs was ideas...which defined the identities of nations and motivated the way they behaved in international institutions and what they did with their power.”⁶ Because the standoff between freedom and tyranny, between democracy and communism, defined the Cold War, Reagan knew it would only be ended when one set of ideas bested the other.

There was another divide, even more profound. Concluding his speech, Reagan turned from the strategic to the spiritual. The Wall was but a symbol of “the most fundamental distinction of all between East and West. The totalitarian world produces backwardness because it does such violence to the spirit,

⁵ James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War* (New York: Viking 2009), 160.

⁶ Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2013), 172.

thwarting the human impulse to create, to enjoy, to worship. The totalitarian world finds even symbols of love and of worship an affront.” He described a luminescent cross that appeared in the sunlight on an East Berlin tower, despite the communist government’s efforts to extinguish it. The metaphor was clear. Decades of state-enforced atheism had not quenched the religious faith of multitudes in the Soviet bloc. Reagan, and America, stood with them, under God.

His imprecations against the wall extended beyond Berlin to the entire Iron Curtain that held captive half of Europe. The Wall, Reagan declared, was merely the most visible “part of a vast system of barriers that divides the entire continent of Europe.” He knew that tearing down the Wall would reverberate far beyond Berlin. As the speech concluded, “Yes, across Europe, this wall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom.”

Reagan’s demand to destroy the Wall was not a one-off applause line. He enshrined it as official US policy. As biographer Steven Hayward points out, Reagan would repeat his call in public fourteen more times over the duration of his presidency.⁷

Not everyone appreciated Reagan’s words. The Soviet news agency *TASS* fulminated that it was “an openly provocative, war-mongering speech.” A *Washington Post* columnist, Jim Hoagland, huffed that “history is likely to record the challenge to tear down the wall as a meaningless taunt.”⁸

History would do otherwise. In demanding the demise of the Wall, Reagan evoked the dream in the hearts of all Berliners, and put the Soviet bloc on notice. The free world would not abide the permanent partition of Berlin, or of Germany, or of Europe. Nor, it would turn out, would the citizens of Eastern Europe accept their own subjugation under communist dictatorships subject to Moscow.

V.

Less than three years after Reagan’s speech, the Wall came down. Gorbachev had a part to play, mostly through what he did not do. Instead of invoking the Brezhnev Doctrine, Gorbachev had repudiated it in July, 1989. He put the Warsaw Pact on notice that he would not send in the Red Army to crush any rebellious satellites. While it would not be Gorbachev who abolished the Wall, he would not act to preserve it. Though the Soviet leader rarely mentioned Reagan’s words, he did not forget them.

It fell to the people of Berlin to fulfill Reagan’s call. On the evening of November 11, 1989, they tore down the Wall. They made their city whole, on the way to making their country whole and free.

What do Reagan’s words at the Brandenburg Gate mean today? Many years removed, they still captivate, convict, and inspire. Even those who know nothing else of Reagan know him as the man who uttered that immortal phrase. Timing and context are everything. Reagan would not have given the same speech in 1982 or 1984. He read the tides of history and knew that the moment was ripe to issue his challenge. America’s military and economic strength were restored, as were its alliances. Democracy was ascendant across the globe. The captive states of Eastern Europe had grown restive under Soviet rule. In Gorbachev he had a counterpart pursuing reform and eager to negotiate.

In the realm of statecraft, words divorced from strategy are just words. Reagan’s demand at the Brandenburg Gate landed like a thunderclap because it was backed by America’s power, principles, and

⁷ Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980-1989* (New York: Crown Forum 2009), 594.

⁸ Cited in Mann, 213.

diplomatic acumen. And it was uttered by a president who for six and a half years had applied growing pressure to the Soviet empire on all sides, from without and within.

The Wall itself is an artifact of history, its fragments scattered and displayed throughout the free world as memorials to its victims and monuments to liberty. A chunk of it stands just yards from the president's grave at the Reagan Presidential Library, bearing silent witness to the man who envisioned its demise. The values that Reagan appealed to – a strong America, inspiring free peoples, leading an alliance of free nations, in awe of transcendence – remain as worthy now, and as imperative, as they were on a summer afternoon in Berlin over three decades ago.